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Hope Evangelical Lutheran Church
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Luther's Doctrine of the Church: An Abbreviated Version

As is the case with Luther's understanding of all other doctrines, his understanding of the church is based on his conviction that justification and salvation are solely the work of God in Christ. We have no responsibility whatsoever to save ourselves from the existential dilemmas we face: our sin, a world held in the grip of darkness, ignorance, evil, and death. When we try to deal with these enemies on our own, we fail. There are no human works whereby we can escape defeat and helplessness in the face of these powers. Only divine power can save us from these enemies of life. Therefore in matters pertaining to salvation from sin, evil, and death, we are entirely passive receivers. We are like the scorched earth after a drought. Life dries up and returns to dust. The only hope is that the skies will open and the rain will fall. The earth doesn't make the rain fall. It comes as a gift from above. And when it does come, everything comes back to life. As the earth receives and absorbs the rain, it is empowered to once again come alive and bear fruit.

Similarly, we simply receive God's grace through faith and are thereby raised up to new life. God's grace removes the power of sin and defeats the power of the devil and death. God's grace is the gift of God's Son, Jesus Christ. He comes to us through the word and in the power of the Spirit. The Spirit accomplishes in us what the word promises to us, namely, forgiveness of sin and the resurrected life of Jesus Christ.

This does not mean that we thereby are relieved of all suffering, grief, temptations, and struggles. Rather, the challenges that these harbingers of darkness bring are the very things that drive us to seek God's mercy and grace. The crosses we bear cause us to let go of useless idols such as wealth, our own works, or any other worldly pursuit in which we may have trusted previously. Our hearts are emptied of these things and instead are opened up to receive Christ who alone has the power to save us. Moreover, because the trust of our hearts—our faith—is now in Christ, we are freed from greed, jealousy, envy and strife, and we are freed for selfless service to our neighbor. Passivity in matters of salvation does not mean passivity in matters having to do with life in this world. Faith is active in love because it has received love from God. This is what it means to say we are justified by grace through faith.

This being the case, the church, the communion of saints, is created by the grace of God. Wherever the gospel is proclaimed and received by faith, there is the church. It is created and sustained by the word of God—the gospel of Jesus Christ—as that word reaches us through the means of grace: the word heard and preached received sacramentally. The church is not the ecclesiastical structure. It is not the visible institution. It is not the rules and regulations embodied in canon law, or in the constitutions of Protestant denominations. Rather, it is a spiritual assembly created,

sustained, and unified by the Holy Spirit working in and through the threefold expression of the word—written, proclaimed, and sacramentally enacted.

This being the case, the true church transcends space and time and is perceived only through faith. As the communion of saints—communion or fellowship with God in the Spirit, and communion in the Spirit with one another—the church therefore includes all people who were called, justified, and sanctified from every time and place. Since the true church is established by the Holy Spirit—the eternal being of God who enters time for the sake of establishing fellowship with fallen human beings—it does not require proximity of either time or place. The communion of saints includes the faithful departed as well as all people from all denominations or church bodies whose faith is in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The barriers that divide people along the lines of culture, race, nationality, or nonessential religious practices don't apply. There are people whose faith in Christ is genuine from all Christian bodies. Such people will recognize and fellowship with one another through their faith. It is the presence of Christ in them that joins them together, not the petty differences related to human traditions and doctrines. In this sense, the true church is in fact, invisible. Just as the presence of Christ is perceived only by the Spirit's gift of an enlightened faith, the church is similarly perceived only by the eyes of faith. In the midst of the darkness of this world, the light of Christ's presence in others is perceivable only by faith.

This does not mean that the church is without visible signs. Just as Jesus' miracles ("signs" in John's gospel) were visible events that indicated his divinity, these are also visible marks of the true church. These include the following:

- 1) All those who share a common faith in Christ as Savior and Lord.
- 2) Those who confess that Christ alone is the head of the church.
- 3) An assembly where the gospel is preached in its purity and according to the apostolic witness contained in scripture.
- 4) An assembly where the sacraments that were instituted by Christ, namely baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and the Sacrament of the Altar, are administered according to the tradition of the apostles.
- 5) A priesthood of believers who call those set aside for this to be pastors whose responsibility is preaching and administering the sacraments.
- 6) Liturgical practices which, while not divinely ordained, promote good order and the gospel.
- 7) Prayer, public praise, and thanksgiving to God.
- 8) The presence of the sacred cross as seen in the inward and outward suffering for Christ.

While these visible signs of the church point to the genuine faith of the assembly, nevertheless, not everyone who joins in are guaranteed to be people of faith. For reasons that are not always clear to us, many will hear the word of God and many will participate in the sacraments who do not have faith in Christ. This, along with the fact that even believers are still tainted with sin, accounts for the divisions, power struggles, strife, and non-essential religious practices that the visible church demonstrates. Unfortunately, because of this, many fall away from the faith and turn to empty and

dead idols for security, comfort, meaning, and happiness. For this reason, those who are entrusted with the responsibility of preaching and teaching the gospel must take this task very seriously. The church is “the creature of the gospel.” If the gospel is not taught in its purity as the good news of Jesus Christ, or if it is distorted by the teaching of human works, be they good works or religious practices, in either case, the Holy Spirit will not be present and the church will fall away from grace. It will become a human institution rather than a communion of saints created by divine power.

Luther’s understanding of the church was largely shaped by his struggle to reform the church of Christendom. Early on, he naively believed that if the gospel came into the light of day, church authorities would welcome and willingly embrace reform. Over time, it became obvious that the opposite was the case. Luther held onto hope all the way to 1530 when the Augsburg Confession was presented to King Charles at Augsburg. When this attempt to remain united to the Roman Catholic Church failed, Luther abandoned all hope in this regard. He had already come to the conclusion that the papacy was the embodiment of antichrist. For him, the rejection of the gospel as proclaimed by the apostles meant that the church did not exist in the Roman institution. This is not to say that he believed there were no Christians in that church. The desire for reform among the common people, and among the princes pointed to the fact that genuine faith was indeed present. Nevertheless, the gospel was systematically suppressed by church authority, and therefore he surrendered himself to the conclusion that an evangelical church had to be established. This church would have no ties to the papacy, nor would it accept the human doctrines taught by the church of Rome. Nevertheless, the divisions of the visible church do not affect the unity of the true church. The true church is a miraculous and divine creation and remains present. As Jesus himself said, “The gates of Hell will not prevail against it.”